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Time to Tell Terrorists

SAM NUNN

"Don't Tread on Me"

President Reagan has made it abundantly clear that terrorism against United States citizens would be met with "swift and effective retribution." Secretary of State Haig followed by saying that rampant international terrorism is the greatest human rights problem today, and that the fight against it will become a top American priority.

I applaud these statements. These words and this strong determination will help deter terrorist activity. The American people are prepared to revitalize the revolutionary slogan, "Don't tread on me."

But these words alone are not enough. The announced policy against terrorism is not self-implementing. It was abundantly clear in the aftermath of the Iranian rescue attempt, where eight brave Americans lost their lives, that this country was not prepared to deal with this kind of terrorist situation with either a national policy or anti-terrorist capability.

Rescue Mission

In the rescue attempt, we learned that there was no combined service capability prepared to operate in counter-terrorist situations. Other shortcomings were in the area of command and control and the failure to train together in a comprehensive, full-scale manner.

All lessons focus on the need for a permanent, highly professional organization to plan and train on a continual basis. We must provide this capability, and I believe that this preparation is underway. The fact that such a military capability exists should be known to all, but the actual operational methods must remain secret.

Terrorism cannot be countered on an "after-the-fact" basis. Our nation must have firmly established and enunciated national policies to discourage these acts, and the ready anti-terrorist capability to deal with them if they occur.

One of the most important ingredients must be a strong, revitalized intelligence community. No anti-terrorist capability can be adequate without excellent intelligence, including covert capabilities which have largely been demolished.

We also must strengthen our domestic law enforcement agencies,

Senator Sam Nunn, D-Ga., is a member of The Star's Board of Editorial Associates. These remarks are adapted from a recent speech.

which have gone through a traumatic post-Watergate reduction in their ability to detect and warn of terrorist activities. These steps can and must be taken within our constitutional framework without resorting to activities which infringe on the constitutional rights of American citizens.

We must, however, repeal some laws and executive orders which go far beyond constitutional requirements or court decisions and which have resulted from a massive overreaction to the Watergate/Vietnam era.

For three years I have pushed legislation to improve both domestic law enforcement and our foreign intelligence capabilities. Last week I again introduced a measure which prohibits the unauthorized identification of intelligence officers and sources of information.

But no matter how capable our anti-terrorist capability, no matter how revitalized our intelligence service, there will be instances that demand prudence and restraint. If an embassy in a friendly nation is sacked by a mob, the United States cannot bomb a friendly government, nor invade with marines.

There will also be instances where the terrorist forces themselves may seek to provoke American intervention in explosive areas of the world. When these circumstances occur, and military action is inappropriate, restraint, patience, and prudence must guide our reactions.

Hostage Obsession

Under such conditions, while we exert diplomatic, political and economic pressure, we must not develop a siege atmosphere that creates the impression of a preoccupied and paralyzed America. A national obsession with hostages can increase the value of the hostages in the minds of the terrorists and prolong their captivity — or escalate the terrorists' demands.

When America appears to be paralyzed, aggression all over the world becomes more likely.

As much as we value human life, there are too many vital American interests and American lives at stake to allow the American government, the American news media, and the American people to appear paralyzed by terrorist activity. We can never again permit the world to believe that America is paralyzed by a terrorist incident, and incapable of meeting other challenges.